

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 16, Year B (track one)

First Reading

1 Kings 8:[1, 6, 10-11], 22-30, 41-43 (optional verses in brackets, omitted verses in italics)

[Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers' houses of the people of Israel, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion.

And all the men of Israel assembled to King Solomon at the feast in the month Ethanim, which is the seventh month. And all the elders of Israel came, and the priests took up the ark. And they brought up the ark of the LORD, the tent of meeting, and all the holy vessels that were in the tent; the priests and the Levites brought them up. And King Solomon and all the congregation of Israel, who had assembled before him, were with him before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and oxen that they could not be counted or numbered.

Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the Most Holy Place, underneath the wings of the cherubim.

For the cherubim spread out their wings over the place of the ark, so that the cherubim overshadowed the ark and its poles. And the poles were so long that the ends of the poles were seen from the Holy Place before the inner sanctuary; but they could not be seen from outside. And they are there to this day. There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets of stone that Moses put there at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the people of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt.

And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.]

Then Solomon said, "The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have indeed built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever." Then the king turned around and blessed all the assembly of Israel, while all the assembly of Israel stood. And he said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who with his hand has fulfilled what he promised with his mouth to David my father, saying, 'Since the day that I brought my people Israel out of Egypt, I chose no city out of all the tribes of Israel in which to build a house, that my name might be there. But I chose David to be over my people Israel.' Now it was in the heart of David my father to build a house for

the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. But the LORD said to David my father, 'Whereas it was in your heart to build a house for my name, you did well that it was in your heart. Nevertheless, you shall not build the house, but your son who shall be born to you shall build the house for my name.' Now the LORD has fulfilled his promise that he made. For I have risen in the place of David my father, and sit on the throne of Israel, as the LORD promised, and I have built the house for the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. And there I have provided a place for the ark, in which is the covenant of the LORD that he made with our fathers, when he brought them out of the land of Egypt."

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven, and said, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart; you have kept with your servant David my father what you declared to him. You spoke with your mouth, and with your hand have fulfilled it this day. Now therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father what you have promised him, saying, 'You shall not lack a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.' Now therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you have spoken to your servant David my father.

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.

"If a man sins against his neighbor and is made to take an oath and comes and swears his oath before your altar in this house, then hear in heaven and act and judge your servants, condemning the guilty by bringing his conduct on his own head, and vindicating the righteous by rewarding him according to his righteousness.

"When your people Israel are defeated before the enemy because they have sinned against you, and if they turn again to you and acknowledge your name and pray and plead with you in this house, then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them again to the land that you gave to their fathers.

“When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, if they pray toward this place and acknowledge your name and turn from their sin, when you afflict them, then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk, and grant rain upon your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance.

“If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence or blight or mildew or locust or caterpillar, if their enemy besieges them in the land at their gates, whatever plague, whatever sickness there is, whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart and stretching out his hands toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways (for you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind), that they may fear you all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our fathers.

“Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name’s sake (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name. (ESV)

Second Reading

Ephesians 6:10–20

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the

mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 6:56–69

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

There is so much happening in our reading from 1 Kings this week that I hardly know where to begin. We have what is, at the surface level, the consecration of the Temple built by Solomon. Well, honestly, Solomon’s indentured slaves, but we haven’t time for that discussion now. But what is going on beneath it all is the consolidation of worship in Jerusalem. In a land filled with other places of worship, other “high places,” Solomon’s prayer (which our lectionary folks left out for the most part) lays the groundwork for the reforms of Josiah, two hundred years yet to come, in which all the high places are torn down. Ritual sacrifice is forbidden anywhere but in the Temple, which is a change of considerable impact.

Small wonder then, that this story of the consecration of Solomon's Temple comes to us from the Deuteronomist, written shortly after the time of Josiah's reforms. Centers of worship/sacrifice were significant sources of economic vitality to the city in which they were located. Yes, many were devoted to lesser gods, other gods, but this had been the habit of the people from the time of Joshua. God was the greatest of the Gods, but hardly the only one, in their thinking.

So when Josiah set about to eliminate all other places of sacrifice (that being the primary mode of worship) he upset a great many apple carts. In support of this action, the Deuteronomist composes the story of the consecration of the Temple in a way that supports Josiah's actions. There are indications of pre-Deuteronomic sources in chapter 8 of 1 Kings, such as Solomon's initial assertion that he has, "indeed built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever." (from the omitted verses) This is quickly corrected in later verses when Solomon says, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" and then, "... the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,'" God does not dwell in the Temple, but God has determined that God's "Name" shall reside there.

It is strange to me that the portion of Solomon's prayer that describes the appeal of the people to the Temple, "stretching out their hands" to that place in a variety of settings has been chopped out of our reading, but the portion that speaking to the appeal of foreigners was left in. Without the preceding verses it lands on the ear quite without context. But what is happening in all those verses is that the Deuteronomist has not only centralized sacrifice, but also prayer, in the Temple. Two things need to be said about this. In the absence of sacrifice, prayer is all that is left to the people, and that too has been removed to a place far from most of them. The second is that, while it makes things more difficult, it also makes prayer an activity *of the people*, and not just the king or the priests. There is a "democratization" of prayer, as I read it called.

For the Deuteronomist, this moment is the high point of the history of the people of God, the union of worship and monarchy. He has shaped the pre-Deuteronomic sources he has into a massive paean to Solomon and his Temple in chapter 8 of 1 Kings. Scholars have also identified later exilic and post-exilic edits, but the bulk of the chapter comes from the time of Josiah.

I would have liked to ramble on about the cloud that filled the Temple, the way that the priests could not stand for the weight of it. These are precious images to me, but my studies this week demanded that I devote myself to writing about this text and its historical setting and origins, its place in the centralization of worship/sacrifice in Jerusalem.

All this leaves me with questions. How wise was this move on Josiah's part? Could he not have found a way to replace other pagan gods with Yahweh worship in the "high places" and preserved the economies of those cities/regions? Must the fear of worship gone wrong mean that we *must* centralize it to a place where it can be better controlled/monitored? How do we repeat these decisions?

Second Reading

In the brief introduction I wrote a few weeks ago to Ephesians, I described what I believe to be the two major concerns that Paul was trying to address in this epistle. The first, and the one we've seen the most evidence of in our lectionary readings, is conflict between Jewish and Gentile believers in the congregation. This week we see evidence of the other, that being that the congregation felt threatened by pagan worship that seemed really powerful.

We see initial evidence of this opposition in the way that Paul builds the Ephesians up in the first chapter, speaking of the "immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe." Now matter how powerful the pagans may seem, the power that is toward you, for you who believe, is greater.

Here in the sixth chapter we receive another general word of encouragement. There is no attention here to Jew or Gentile, only admonition to put on the gifts God has given them/us for the contest, the armor of battle. I have prayed this prayer over myself many, many times, and I'd like to share with you how it is that I understand each piece of that armor to function.

The Belt of Truth.

The "truth" with which I begin is that I am beloved of God. Simply that. As I prepare to face the enemy's lies and attempts to tear me down or draw me away from God, I remember that I am beloved. That is the "belt" that holds everything together. Then I put on

The Breastplate of Righteousness.

This is not a description of my feeble attempts at righteousness, but I put on the righteousness purchased for me by Jesus at the Cross. I can withstand every accusation, every attack when they all bounce off the reality that because of the Blood of Jesus, I am righteous, and nothing and no one can change that. Then comes my footwear,

The Preparation of the Gospel of Peace. (a better translation than what we find in the ESV)

I am at peace with God. You are at peace with God. Where there was enmity, Jesus as created peace. I've heard some say that Roman legionaries wore spiked sandals for battle. The spikes slanted backward, making it impossible to dislodge their phalanxes. I don't know if that's accurate, but I like the image. The peace that Jesus created makes it impossible for the enemy to push me backward. I next take up

The Shield of Faith

with which I extinguish all the flaming arrows or darts of the enemy. My faith, that gift from God that enables me to put my trust in God and not myself, doesn't just stop the arrows, but extinguishes their flames. When the enemy cannot dislodge me, the flames will follow. My faith covers the darts, robs them of oxygen, renders them powerless to do me harm. Following that, I put on

The Helmet of Salvation.

This helmet guards my thoughts. I am armored. I cannot be harmed, but the enemy will attempt to whisper thoughts into my mind to cause me to doubt, to break ranks with my phalanx, to become vulnerable. Salvation isn't my admission into heaven. It is the wholeness to which I am restored by the Blood of Jesus (which includes citizenship in the Kingdom). I hold on to that reality and it guards my thoughts, helps me recognize the enemy's whispers for what they are. And last, I take up

The Sword of the Spirit.

Which is the word of God. I have seen too many Christians waving their Bibles around when they read this, as if the Bible were the Sword of which Paul speaks here. But Paul uses the noun *rhema* here. Even if he meant the Scriptures (which for him would have included only the Hebrew Scriptures) he'd have used *logos*. *Rhema* refers to the word God speaks in the present, through the inspired person. It speaks to the current moment more intimately and precisely than the written word can. When Paul says that his hope is that we all might prophesy (1 Cor. 14:1) this is what he means. That we should all learn to speak the *rhema* words of God into the present moment.

This is the Sword of the Spirit, which sees through the murk of this world to the Kingdom that lies within and releases that reality by speaking it. As God creates by a word, we are empowered as servants of the Kingdom to release Kingdom reality by a

word, by the Sword of the Spirit. One of the spiritual weapons by which we bring down strongholds.

And this, brothers and sisters, is how I pray the Whole Armor of God.

Gospel Text

I think I've exhausted anything I have to say at present concerning Jesus' "Bread of Life" discourse in John 6. That it is not eucharistic in original intent (though that doesn't rule out our later application of it as such), that eating and drinking of Jesus' flesh and blood is a metaphor for hearing and believing His words, these things I've said.

This week my focus turns to Peter and his confession. In John there is no question, "But who do you say that I am?" Rather, Jesus asks of those who remain, "Do you want to go away as well?" Peter's response, that Jesus is the One with the "words of eternal life," is followed by his assertion that Jesus is also "the Holy One of God."

Simon Peter has actually played a very small part in the narrative up to this point. He is mentioned in passing in earlier chapters, but is not an actor in the story. He doesn't pop up again until he objects to Jesus washing his feet at the last supper. He denies Jesus, is told about the resurrection by the women from the tomb, and is restored when Jesus meets him by the sea after the resurrection.

This tells me that Peter lacks the authority in John's community that he held in the communities that wrote and used the synoptic Gospels. He is more a useful narrative device than a well worked out character. This isn't to say that Peter the person wasn't the leader we find in the synoptics and Acts, only that he was less important to the Johannine community. That it is he who confesses Jesus as "the Holy One of God" and not someone else speaks to the likelihood that this was something known among all strands of those who followed Jesus in the early years. The situation has changed, but the person naming Jesus remains the same.

I will close by making this observation. Peter's confession comes in close proximity to some very hard words, no matter which Gospel we read. In the synoptics it immediately precedes Jesus' first prediction of his suffering and death. In John it follows immediately after the teaching on consuming Jesus' flesh and blood. It does seem to me that confessing Jesus as the Holy One of God, the Christ, always seems to mean accepting some hard teachings.